WASHINGTON POST
11 April 1986

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A Gray Mist Over Covert Aid

Anger from President Reagan when he realized the "covert" dispatch of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles had made headlines in the United States before reaching front lines in Angola triggered political turbulence that shows the difficulty of sending secret aid to freedom fighters engaged in paramilitary operations—or war.

Reagan's anger was as tight-lipped and cold as his usual countenance is benign and affable. How could such an outrageous leak be permitted, he asked national security aide John Poindexter, risking destruction of his whole effort to shore up freedom fighters? Driven by such strong presidential emotion, quickly transmitted by Poindexter to all sensitive pressure points within the administration, the Stingers-for-Savimbi decision entered a gray area of doubt.

The doubt appears now to have dissipated. But the gray mist covering future "covert" military aid will not soon lift. Indeed, it will be thickened by strong congressional concerns of constitutionality, making strange bedfellows of Democratic liberals and Republican hardliners. It will be deepened by worries of the military that its own supplies of modern weapons such as the Stinger are being snatched from its arsenals by grasping agents of the CIA.

Thus the Pentagon seized the moment of the president's high dudgeon to reassess its Stinger stocks. The Army brass suddenly concluded that the Stingers earmarked for Savimbi would be taken from its own stockpile. That question—not a noticeable problem when Reagan was moving toward his secret decision to arm Savimbi with Stingers—went before the Joint Chiefs of Staff late last week, and at least some Stingers were put on temporary "hold."

Of course, the Pentagon could not long sustain temporizing in the face of the commander-in-chief's unambiguous decision to arm Savimbi with the weapon that could make his forces safe from the dread Soviet MI-24 gunship.

But the Pentagon's spontaneous reaction to the bureaucratic turbulence that exploded after the president's angry conversation with Poindexter uncovered the true mood there: concern over future Soviet acquisition of the shoulder-fired Stinger if one should be captured in Angola; disgruntlement that its own scarce supplies were being snatched by the CIA.

In Congress, Stingers-for-Savimbi headlines infuriated the House and Senate intelligence committees, even though the leak might actually have sprung right there. Both had been briefed on the decision a day or two earlier, and, even among some supporters of covert operations, the decision raised hackles.

Reaganites in the Senate have always wanted Savimbi to be armed by the United States, but in the full glare of publicity. That is the policy such conservatives as Sen. Malcolm Wallop have always defended. Because the Reagan Doctrine of advancing the perimeters of democracy has achieved full status as U.S. policy, Wallop insists, the administration should not have to stoop to secret methods of carrying it out. What is needed is a trumpet to proclaim it.

For different reasons, Rep. Lee Hamilton, the austere chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, agrees. Hamilton told us he favors many of the CIA's "plausibly deniable" covert operations. Hamilton told us that made-in-America military weapons sent to highly publicized paramilitary war zones "make a complete phony" of plausible deniability. Who, he asked, is kidding whom?

Hamilton has pushed a bill through his committee that would compel the administration to handle paramilitary arms aid as normal legislation. He knows it has no chance to become law so long as Reagan is president, but he insisted to us that Congress constitutionally cannot be "shut out" of possible war-and-peace decisions implicit in paramilitary wars. He himself would oppose arms aid for Savimbi.

For different reasons, and wanting different results, both Wallop and Hamilton want to open up Congress to public battle on the question of Stingers for Savimbi and other Reagan Doctrine beneficiaries. But that course was totally blocked by Secretary of State George Shultz, who has convinced Reagan—but no one else in the administration—that public aid to Savimbi would wreck U.S. policy in southern Africa.

It is doubtful whether the president or Shultz thought through the puzzles of how to deliver paramilitary assistance to anti-Soviet enemies of communism, including the grave issue of "plausible deniability" of knowledge in the leak capital of the universe. Reagan knows Savimbi needs help and needs it now, but he must wonder if there isn't a better way to give it to him.